

# Of myths and men: the ancient Olympics

Jason König

## The Olympic flame

The Olympic games are one of the best-known and most instantly recognisable products of the ancient world. But how much do we really know about the ancient Olympics, the experience of athletes and participants, and the role of sport in Greek society? Our perceptions of ancient athletics are often heavily influenced by present-day Olympic practices and beliefs. These have certainly imitated ancient customs, but they have also adapted them beyond recognition. The 'Olympic spirit', with its celebration of amateurism, is very much a modern invention, out of step with the way in which ancient athletes would have understood their own activities. Athletics played a very different role in ancient Greek society and politics and education.

And, indeed, the ancient Olympics themselves were very far from unchanging over the centuries. The Olympic festival ran for well over 1000 years, from its foundation in 776 B.C. to just before A.D. 400, when it was banned by the Christian Emperor

### The Olympics: origins

The first Olympic games were said to have been held under Kronos, Zeus' father, before the latter was born; illustrious organisers of several consequent festivals include Zeus and Herakles. Legend said that the games were later forgotten and the re-founded in 776 B.C., the traditional date for the first Olympiad. Archaeological research provides a different perspective, but confirms that the site had a very long history. The earliest finds date back to the early bronze age (third millennium B.C.), but it is impossible to show that the site was in continuous use between the bronze age and the early iron age (late 10th century B.C.) when simple bronze and terracotta statuettes testify to the beginnings of the later sanctuary.

Theodosius as part of his (only partially successful) crackdown on pagan religion. Over the course of that time, it was influenced by the colossal changes that affected the structures of Greek society as a whole, even though those influences were often concealed behind claims to unchanging continuity with the distant past. In that sense, ancient and modern Olympics perhaps have more in common than I suggested in the last paragraph, since both have always combined an outward adherence to tradition with continual innovation.

## Festive spirit

The ancient Olympic games were above all a religious festival, and that fact should immediately alert us to the fundamental differences between the ancient and modern athletics. The athletic events were surrounded by a huge programme of sacrifices and processions. The athletic areas of the Olympic site – the stadium, the gymnasium (or training area) and the hippodrome (for horse racing) – were centred around a closely packed complex of temples to the gods, as we can see from the aerial photo of the site in its present form (below). The building in the

very centre, with the grass-banked stadium stretching away behind it, was the Temple of Zeus, which contained a famous thirteen-metre high statue of the god, made from gold and ivory by the sculptor Pheidias in the fifth century B.C. Dotted around the sacred grove surrounding this temple was a series of smaller temples, and also a huge number of statues of athletes, dedicated by athletic victors in honour of the gods. The area was alive with the spirit of the great athletes of the Greek past. Some modern visitors have clearly felt (or persuaded themselves to feel?) the same way, praising the site's unusually atmospheric qualities.

The contestants, all male, were divided by age into two groups, boys and men, who competed separately. The athletics began, on the first morning (out of five), after an oath-taking ceremony for all competitors and judges. Olympia was unusual in having athletic and horse-racing events only; most festivals, big and small, combined those with musical competitions, which were almost equally prestigious. The programme contained the three Greek combat sports (wrestling, boxing, and – a combination of the two – pankration), running races over a variety of distances, chariot-racing, pentathlon, and finally, on the fourth afternoon, a race in armour. The fifth day was taken up with a procession to the temple of Zeus, and the crowning of victors. The combat sports were the biggest crowd-pullers of all, and were violent even by modern standards. Some of the amphoras of oil awarded as a prize at the Athenian festival of the Panathenaia (see also Robin Osborne's piece in this issue) shows boxers fighting with leather straps wound round their hands. In later periods we even hear of boxers fighting with lead weights strapped over their fingers. The boundaries between boxing and the Roman gladiatorial entertainment must have been narrower than idealising modern visions of sporting virtue might lead us to expect. Ancient boxing seems to have relied mainly on blows to the head (more so than modern boxing where body punches have a proportionate role), hence the extraordinarily solid defensive postures these fighters have adopted. However, the paint-

### The buildings of Olympia

Olympia was already an established centre in Greece and abroad when, about 600 B.C., its first monumental building, a wooden Doric temple dedicated to Hera, was constructed. Over the centuries its columns were, one by one, replaced by stone ones. These columns reflected different styles of several centuries, making for a most idiosyncratic building. A number of cities soon constructed a row of treasuries close to the Temple of Hera: in these small buildings, a city exhibited its most impressive dedications. The Temple of Hera remained the only sanctuary at Olympia for over a century, though it is not clear whether it was dedicated to Hera alone or whether she shared her temple with Zeus (who was, after all, the main deity of the sanctuary). The main location for the worship of Zeus was an altar, which was ever increasing in size because the ashes of the sacrifices were not removed. By the Roman period it was several metres high. Zeus received his own monumental temple after the Persian Wars, in the first half of the fifth century B.C. Much of the temple's architectural sculpture survives as a fine example of early classical art.

ing may also be intended to have an element of parody, not least in the tiny size of the heads the boxers are protecting. The admiration for athletic role models to which I referred in my opening article was balanced, as it is today, by satirical criticism of brainless, over-muscled athletes.

### Identity parade

Why did all of these traditions attract so much devotion? One answer must be that athletics were closely bound up with what we now call 'identity': those who watched and competed used the games to as a way of understanding themselves and their role in the world, and of styling themselves in the eyes of others. First and foremost, the Olympics were associated with masculinity. The right to compete, and even to watch the games, seems to have been restricted to men. In fact, Greek athletics as a whole seems to have been primarily a male activity. We do find some exceptions to that (there is some evidence, especially in Sparta, for women training, and there are stories of women competing in disguise), but the evidence is very sketchy. Moreover, the fact that very few sources take an interest in this female activity must in itself be significant: athletic skill and physical training were conceived of as definitively male privileges.

The Olympic festival was also a focus for Greek identity. Traditionally it was a 'Panhellenic' occasion, in other words an occasion where representatives from the whole of the Greek world could gather together, and where the many different Greek cities put aside their differences and celebrated common beliefs and traditions. As such it attracted many famous figures other than athletes. We hear of famous writers and philosophers delivering speeches and reading their work in Olympia. The festival was also adopted as the basis for traditional Greek dating, with each four-year time period from 776 B.C. onwards named after the victor of the man's stadion (sprint-race). Many writers published lists of victors, stretching back to the very first celebration of the festival, always claiming authenticity for their own versions. Several cities imitated the Olympic programme for their own games, seeking to give their festivals greater prestige. Even the name was pirated: we hear of Olympics springing up all over the Mediterranean.

### Changing places

As I have already suggested, however, the status of Olympia as a kind of symbolic centre for Greece should not blind us to that fact that things were constantly changing. The programme itself was far from fixed, and events were still being added and taken away as late as the third century B.C. Even more important than these internal adjustments were the great changes that took place within Greek society during those thousand years, and which in turn affected the status of Olympia. The festival in its early years was part of a very gradual process of the development of a shared sense of Greek identity between the most important cities of mainland Greece. As the Greek world grew, athletes came from further and further afield. New buildings were being put up all the time, sponsored by individuals from a wide range of communities.

Olympia reached a new peak of popularity in the Roman Empire, when the whole Greek athletic scene underwent an extraordinary revival. This revival did not escape Roman influence, however, and a number of emperors sponsored buildings in the Olympic sanctuary, imposing themselves on this definitively Greek architectural landscape. The music-mad Nero even had the timing and programme of the festival altered so that he could compete at musical contests there, and be crowned an Olympic victor. Finally from the third-century onwards, the Olympic festival had to fight increasingly hard to maintain its status, against Christian criticisms of pagan athletic spectacles, and against the threat of invading armies. The site had to be heavily fortified in the late third century A.D., for example, at the cost of several of its ancient buildings.

Olympia was for a millennium a powerful symbol of Greek identity, which provided a crucial focus for the male Greek world's sense of itself and an example for the athletic festivals proliferating everywhere. At the same time, however, it was an utterly atypical event, an extraordinary spectacle which drew people from hundreds of miles away precisely because of its uniqueness. It was also constantly developing (as indeed the modern Olympics have also done), with its significance constantly shifting in the light of momentous changes within the Mediterranean world more widely.

*Jason König teaches in St Andrew's. His book on Greek athletics in the Roman empire will be out soon.*

For more on the ancient Olympics, see:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Olympics/>

<http://www.upenn.edu/museum/Olympics/olympicintro.html>

### Later developments

The sanctuary always retained the character of a grove, never reaching the magnificence of later, planned sanctuary complexes. Over the centuries, however, a number of buildings were added: for example a number of colonnades along the edge, a small temple of the Mother of the Gods, and a building commemorating Philip II of Macedon and his family.

### Timing

The games took place every four years, around the second or third full moon after the summer solstice (that is, in July or August). This accounts for the heat some ancient commentators complain about. The reason was surely that this is one of the low seasons for agricultural activities in Greece, and a time of comparatively stable sailing conditions in the Mediterranean. A general armistice was in force around the time of the festivals. All was calculated so that as many people as possible might attend the festival.